

CONTROLLING THE LIMITS OF POSSIBILITY: ON THE PRIVATIZATION OF EDUCATION AND CULTURE

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In his influential text, “Culture is Ordinary” (1958), Welsh academic, novelist and critic, Raymond Williams made a compelling case for a holistic definition of culture that embraced both ways of life and the processes of discovery and creative production in knowledge and the arts. Culture has since been more widely recognized as that which encompasses not only what we make or believe, but all that we are. How we live out each and every day of our lives, and how we interact with those around us, is shaped by our cultural value systems. Through language, education, tradition and ritual, etiquette and other codes of acceptable behaviour, culture conveys the terms that comprise the social contract by which we participate in civic life.

To control culture is to influence how people perceive their autonomy, agency, and rights, including their capacity to imagine what is and is not possible. It is in this light that the increasing privatization of education and art, all too infrequently discussed in the same breath, can be better understood not only as part of the drive to increase corporate profit through the privatization of *everything*, but as a strategy to facilitate more aggressive social transformations in the future.

English literary theorist and critic, Terry Eagleton, noted that “we live within societies whose aim is not simply to combat radical ideas—that one would readily expect—but to wipe them from living memory: to bring about an amnesiac condition in which it would be as though such notions had never existed, placing them beyond our very powers of conception.” (*The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 1990). This includes efforts to “normalize” certain conditions to the point that others cannot be imagined.

When private enterprise encroaches onto (or becomes insinuated within) sites presumed to value intellectual and creative freedom such as institution-based sites

of learning, and public or semi-public cultural spaces such as art galleries and/or artist-run centres, the implicit and explicit messaging about the need for that presence, including its right to be there, affects perceptions about the role and status of business in public life. The nuances of this can be quickly summarized by former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's now infamous pronouncement at the end of the Cold War that capitalism was the only valid ideology around which a society may be organized: "there is no alternative."

How valid, or normal, is it that fast food outlets dot university campuses where independent cafeterias once stood? Or that corporations fund research chairs and claim partial or complete ownership of the advances achieved within, while simultaneously stifling contradictory research? Or that art galleries require corporate sponsorship for exhibition programming and actively consult with sponsors to ensure brand identity is not compromised? The idea that the private sector's needs trump the right of individuals and communities to access intellectual and economic diversity as a public good is problematic, and yet it prevails. The superior status of corporations—either because we've come to rely on them financially, or because they are considered better at fulfilling services—is a matter of cultural socialization. It is a learned concept repeated by politicians and the media, and in many classrooms.

While some might think for-profit interests sneaking into and taking control of universities and artistic institutions sounds like conspiracy, consider that its no coincidence former Québec Finance Minister, Raymond Bachand, in February 2010 described planned austerity measures under the leadership of Liberal Premiere, Jean Charest a "révolution culturelle"¹ (a cultural revolution). The first step to removing public services as a social right from the public imagination is to normalize user pay post-secondary education and health care as the only logical response to economic crisis. Training people to accept cuts reluctantly, and forget that better options existed is a matter of shifting their way of thinking and their expectations.

If it was a cultural revolution they wanted, it was a cultural revolution they got... just not the one they expected. Having both more politically literate and effectively structured student unions than elsewhere in Canada, as well as a longer history of grassroots organizing, Québec students declared the tuition hikes a form of class warfare and initiated resistance through lobbying and demonstrations. On February 12, 2012 they were pushed to launch an unlimited general strike ("grève générale illimitée"). Daily actions further articulated how their concerns were situated within the broader context of neoliberal globalization. As parents and grandparents began to stand up for the students in their lives, and as high-schoolers faced their future, resistance grew to create a citizens' movement where many people participated in direct action for the first time in their lives to produce traffic blockades and other economic disruptions. The province responded with violence and, just like scenes associated with Occupy, police gleefully attacked even the most peaceful of demonstrators.

In May 2012, the new Bill 78 restricting education-related protest turned into the draconian Law 12 which, like the War Measures Act, imposed curfew and limited assembly. Groups of more than 50 people² were obligated to seek permission from authorities or face stiff penalties including fines of up to \$125,000 per day³. At this point, more citizens were pushed to the brink and rejected the province's scare tactics. In an unprecedented move, even members of Barreau du Québec⁴ wearing their official robes, joined the protests. The single largest act of civil disobedience in Canadian history took place on May 25 with estimated participation of between 400,000 and 500,000 people⁵. By July, the city of Montreal and province of Quebec had spent \$9 million⁶ on policing alone to quell the demonstrations, proving the argument that there was more than enough money available for education and that spending is a choice.

Le Carré rouge, the red square, became a symbol of solidarity and collective strength. Rallied by inspirational imagery and slogans featuring it as produced by students and artists, never before had such a broad cross-section of citizens, from babies in strollers to elderly persons with walkers, mobilized against an elected government in Canada. The Québec Liberals reluctantly called for an election in September and they lost. However, the victory for the striking students and other progressives was slim. The Parti Québécois won a minority government and promised to drop the current tuition hike, but warned discussions would need to resume the following year. The PQ also halted the Liberal's "Plan Nord", an economic development strategy with dire health and environmental consequences. The streets of Québec are quiet once again and although true transformation has yet to happen, its population is considerably more self-aware, both of the circumstances surrounding them, and of their power.⁷



Street actions, courtesy of the author.

Yet many more efforts to privatize pass without so much of a peep, particularly in the world of arts and culture, increasingly labelled “the cultural sector” or “creative industries”.

Business for the Arts⁸, a Canadian organization based in Toronto, moves across the country promoting its artsVest program⁹ with evangelical zeal. The initiative encourages regional arts councils to offer matching funds to cultural organizations that obtain sponsorship from private enterprise. Having recently joined, the Winnipeg Arts Council’s website describes the program as follows:

The goal of artsVest Winnipeg is to foster the development of new, innovative and mutually beneficial partnerships between Winnipeg’s small to mid-sized businesses and cultural organizations. artsVest will not only provide training and matching incentives for cultural organizations, it will also help build important bridges between the arts and business communities. *The arts provide currently underutilized opportunities for business investment. With large and diverse audiences, arts events and projects provide businesses with terrific marketing opportunities. This program will help cultural organizations think more creatively about sponsorship opportunities when seeking partnerships, and assist them in stewardship after the sponsorships are secured*¹⁰.

Offering one level of matching funds to organizations that woo a business donating to the arts for the first time in three years, less to organizations if the business has a history of giving, and less still for in-kind sponsorships, the program emphasizes free training to pitch proposals and access to a declining fund on a first come/first served basis until the money in a given round runs out. This translates into arts organizations not only competing for sponsors, but for the first crack at a new sponsor since that has greater return. Winnipeg is entering its second year of the program.

Whether the Winnipeg Arts Council’s discontinuation of its Special Projects Grant program was independent of the introduction of artsVest has yet to be addressed, but the result is the same: non-profit arts organizations are obliged to cozy up with for-profit business because traditional sources of funding are disappearing. One arts administrator reported in confidence that three distinct attempts to acquire sponsorship were met with criticisms that her organization’s projects were “too weird”. She was initially enthusiastic about artsVest, but has since revised her position. Other administrators, from albeit less risk-taking organizations, view the program as useful with one administrator even going so far as to suggest artsVest is “only trying to help us prepare for the future”, as if Business for the Arts is somehow motivated by empathy. This type of response unquestioningly accepts the ideological rhetoric of austerity as if there really were no alternative, when in fact that couldn’t be further from the truth.

Founded in 1974, Business for the Arts, much like its British counterpart, Arts & Business (formerly Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts founded in 1976), takes cues from the Business Committee for the Arts¹¹ founded in 1967

by the same US banking tycoon David Rockefeller who founded and maintains involvement with an aggressive neoliberal think tank called the Trilateral Commission.¹² In all cases, these private organizations receive varying degrees of public funding to encourage non-profit public cultural organizations *away* from public funding. The elite that frame these organizations use regressive tax law to dismantle the base that makes public funding available with one hand, while ushering non-profit arts and cultural organizations into the grasp of business with the other.

What does a company peddling financial services, or insurance, or premium liquor have to do with arts and culture, anyway? Absolutely nothing, until the company decides a cultural partnership will help them “increase corporate reputation, image/brand awareness” and/or achieve “image modification”. It’s a zero-sum game disguised as win-win. The for-profit business gets a fully deductible marketing expenditure while cultivating their public and brand image. The non-profit, on the other hand, jumps through hoops keeping the sponsor happy, whether by satisfying their ego or ensuring programming stays just the way sponsors like it. The additional benefit to for-profits is that non-profits become dependent on their success: why rock the boat participating in social or economic disruption if it might cause sponsorship pockets to shrink? It is certainly no coincidence that Director of Arts & Business, Colin Tweedy, suggested in 1991 that arts sponsorship was one of the cornerstones of Thatcherism.¹³

This becomes a question of how we want to spend our time – learning how to suck up to businesses more effectively or becoming educated about the larger framework motivating these changes while self-organizing to resist them?

On a separate document please outline the following (2 pages maximum):

- a) Briefly outline the details of the sponsorship agreement, including what the business is sponsoring and what benefits are provided.** A copy of your sponsorship agreement may suffice but please ensure it includes a clear list of all benefits provided.
- b) The business objective(s) of the sponsor that will be achieved through this initiative.** Please specify. Examples could include *improved employee relations, enhanced community relations, increased corporate reputation, image/brand awareness, image modification, the opportunity for client development and networking opportunity*.
- c) How will the sponsorship meet these objectives?** Please include how you and your business partner will work together to meet the objectives.
- d) How you are assessing if these objectives have been met.** Please list the measures you will apply. Examples could include *number of vouchers redeemed, number of clients that accept your invitation, audience questionnaire, tracking media coverage, number of employees who attend, verbal feedback from clients and/or employees and the business's own evaluation process*.

Excerpted screen capture from Winnipeg Arts Council artsVest funds request/report form showing benefits to business as quoted above

As of December 19, 2012, The Canada Council for the Art's "Grants to Professional Independent Critics and Curators" program was renamed "Visual Arts: Project Grants for Curators and Critics". Removal of the word "independent" is not only highly symbolic for a program that once proudly offered financial support for the production of critical, conceptual space outside of institutional frameworks, but unexpected changes to the program's expense allowances now force unaffiliated curators to work through institutions. Whereas unaffiliated curators could previously use grant money to pay artist fees and expenses related to mounting an exhibition, "the program no longer supports the presentation or publication of work. It focuses on curatorial research, writing and residencies¹⁴." This is a huge blow to independent thought tantamount to censorship because a national jury of expert peers is no longer enough to declare an experimental project worthy of support. Institutions are now reinforced as gatekeepers, and given extra padlocks and chains. This is especially disconcerting because, increasingly dependent on corporate sponsorship as they are, risk-adverse curatorial staff needing programming approval from increasingly elite and conservative Board members will pursue fewer and less challenging projects rather than rock the boat. Perhaps it was the timing of the announcement, like so many other Harper Government¹⁵ tidbits that slip by unnoticed, but Canadian curators have yet to blink over this one.

It is worth mentioning that these changes come at a time of expanding discourse around professionalizing the arts through education. Beyond the introduction of Doctoral level studies in studio practice as research, there are now public and private degree programs and certifications for arts administrators, curators, and dealers now known as commercial gallerists. The ever-growing network of curatorial training programs is particularly interesting in that while encouraging participants to move from one to the next in a new form of tourism for the wealthy or those willing to incur debt, they also happen to extend notions associated with western capitalism further afield. This is arguably a form of cultural imperialism in and of itself. Many of these programs implicitly promote a unified theory of curating that systematizes approaches, ultimately culling out the exceedingly radical as trainees are encouraged to embrace incessant travel between large, overhead hungry institutions and to view them as responsible forums still distinct from the art market and all that it implies. Further still, the growth of private consultancy for artists, from how to find abundance to how to become famous, imparts the idea that artists lack business savvy and are doomed to failure without it.

Each country has distinct histories with regard to colonization and imperialism, class struggle, gender disparity, and economic distribution, yet it is generally recognized that those with a more fair approach to social welfare have higher overall standards of living, including better respect for social, political, intellectual and creative freedom. And while the experience of people (including artists) still varies from place to place, those with access to a more diverse public realm can encounter greater opportunities.

The move toward privatization therefore hinges on questions of perceived dependency. University Presidents, Regents and Senators, just like Board Members and Directors of arts and cultural organizations, could easily decide they don't want or need policies with ideological bias in favour of profit and yet they don't either because they are afraid of confronting power and losing what funding they have left, or because they are (or want to be) power.

Not all people of the world have access to public funding for education and the arts, but why should anyone allow what does exist to be budgeted out of existence? Why should citizens go to corporations, foundations, and wealthy individuals, hat in hand, to seek their favour? Instead of pandering to these entities, which frequently compromise the true needs of students and/or cultural producers, decision-makers could advocate for economic elites to pay their fair share of tax and demand the closure of legislative loopholes that allow casino capitalism to create crisis upon crisis.

It is widely proven that corporations and the wealthy are paying less tax now than ever and what's left is being squandered on militarization, prison expansion, and otherwise squarely into the hands of the elite through subsidies, bail outs, research and development tax credits, and other corporate welfare. Just as corporate sponsorships of the arts doesn't clean the reputation of the companies involved, taking their fair share back into the public purse doesn't clean money either, but it does mean that the public defines what happens to it, as it is within the public realm that we can continue to struggle for greater equality for all. Private interests don't promote experimental investigations of society, unless it somehow serves their goal of increased profitability, and only when they can control the message. They don't want to challenge anyone into thinking differently about the status quo. They only want to grow and increase their share of power, including social and cultural capital, which allows them to do this with greater ease.

Some will argue that taking government out of the arts is a good thing – that it will return to being produced out of passion, and those who struggle hard enough will be recognized. But isn't it already a debunked cliché that starving artists work the hardest because, even if they're not recognized in their lifetime, posthumous fame is reward enough? Some will argue that autonomous artists were just a blip on the radar of history and needing patrons now is no different than before. Then what was the point realizing the incredibly essential role of artists as forecasters, interpreters, visionaries, idea makers, experimental explorers, or (as is now popular) researchers for public good? Whether one values the arts for their empowering and transformative capacity, or whether one merely appreciated their decorative benefits, surely it can be agreed that reducing the spectrum of possibility does not serve society well.

As frustrating as it is that so few in the arts appear willing to vocalize opposition to the growth of private for-profit influence over society, there are glimmers of hope. Take for example the incredible work of the BeautifulCity.ca Alliance¹⁶ that, initiated by Toronto-based artist/curator, Devon Ostrom, sought to tax billboard advertising to fund art in the public sphere. A nearly decade long battle to resist the overbearing presence of corporations in public space successfully imposed the tax, triumphed over advertisers in a court of appeals, and finally fought regressive attempts by the city to re-direct the newly collected tax away from the arts¹⁷. Exciting!

As cultural producers, many with ties to academic institutions in one form or another, we can choose to recognize that our practices are increasingly used to support the profitability of the corporate power elite in ways that harm our best interest. We can choose to communicate directly with our communities and form relationships on our own terms. We can choose to organize ourselves by asserting our values and demonstrating resistance to the “there is no alternative” attitude. All we have to do is start.

1 “Budget: Raymond Bachand talks about the ‘cultural revolution,’” 2010, published in *Les Affaires*: <http://www.lesaffaires.com/secteurs-d-activite/gouvernement/budget--raymond-bachand-parle-de-revolution-culturelle/510567>

2 “Quebec Law Breaches Canada’s International Human Rights Obligations,” published in Amnesty International: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/quebec-law-breaches-canada-s-international-human-rights-obligations-2012-05-26>

3 Bruce Walsh and Grace Westcott, *Quebec’s Bill 78 –Law or Order?*,” 2012, published in PEN Canada, <http://pencanada.ca/blog/quebecs-bill-78-law-or-order/>

4 Barreau du Québec (Bar of Quebec) is the provincial law society for lawyers in Quebec, Canada. It was founded May 30, 1849, as the Bar of Lower Canada.

5 Amelia Schonbek, “The Long March: On the Frontlines with Quebec’s Student Protesters,” 2012, published in *The Walrus*: <http://thewalrus.ca/the-long-march/>

6 Quebec student protests add \$9 million to policing costs, 2012, published in *Maclean’s*: <http://www2.macleans.ca/2012/07/16/quebec-student-protests-add-9-million-to-policing-costs/>

7 This text was written several months ago, and the struggle continues. To summarize, the Québec Government’s Summit on Education (February 2013) resulted in the unfavourable decision that tuition rates should rise according to inflation. Students returned to the streets and, since February 26, have faced terrible police violence sanctioned under a new City of Montreal Bylaw, P-6, which much like Québec Bill 78, declares protest illegal. A large demonstration is taking place on April 22, against P-6. For updates about the student uprising, please visit: <http://www.asse-solidarite.qc.ca/>. Written in French, the site provides accurate information posted by the most active organizers, L’Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante. Another source is a booklet called “Le fond de l’air est rouge” by Stefan Christoff of Howl arts collective, which will launch at the Brecht Forum on May 20: <http://www.howlarts.net/words>.

- 8 More about Business for the Arts (Bfta): <http://www.businessforthearts.org/>
- 9 More about artsVest: <http://www.artsvest.com/>
- 10 More about artsVest Winnipeg: http://www.winnipegarts.ca/index.php?artsvest_winnipeg.
- 11 As counter-intuitive as this may seem, Business Committee for the Arts merged with Americans for the Arts in 2008 - http://www.americansforthearts.org/news/press/2008/2008_10_28.as
- 12 More about Rockefeller's involvement with the Trilateral Commission:
<http://www.trilateral.org/go.cfm?do=Page.View&pid=2>
- 13 Colin Tweedy, "Sponsorship of the Arts - An the Outdated Fashion or Model of the Future?", Museum Management and Curatorship, vol 10, June 1991, p 161. Cited in Chin-tao Wu, Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention since the 1980s. London: Verso. 2002.
- 14 Private correspondence.
- 15 Tories rebrand 'Government of Canada' as 'Harper Government', 2011 published in: The Toronto Star: http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2011/03/03/tories_rebrand_government_of_canada_as_harper_government.html
- 16 More about BeautifulCity.ca: <http://www.beautifulcity.ca>
- 17 Toronto Arts Council Press Release, 2013:
<http://hosted.verticalresponse.com/246297/2319cddc69/1379032459/1ba7dc26a6/>

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